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ABSTRACT

Attending to students' employability within a more student-driven higher education system is high on the policy agenda in Britain. Career services have a key contribution to make to this agenda. Higher education career services have moved away from the one-to-one interview to a widely adopted open-access model, in which students have access to a range of resources. Within the institutional structure, career services can be aligned to other student, academic, or marketing services or can stand on their own. In the national policy context, it is left to higher education institutions to decide whether to offer career services, what form they should take, and what level of resources they should have. Pressures on the core activities of career services are changing their nature and raising questions about their future form. Extension of supplementary activities developed around the core activities could lead to broader strategic options. Seven strategic directions for career services could lead to major restructuring. Four options are based on stronger embedding within the institution: integrated guidance, integrated placement, curriculum, and learning organization. Three are based on delivering career services after graduation: extended support, lifelong guidance, and alumni. Professional issues include structures of professional collaboration, recruitment and professional development, and quality assurance. A checklist of strategic issues and a process for strategic planning have been proposed. (YLB)

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NICEC
Briefing

ED 419 172

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

# Strategic Directions for Higher Education Careers Services

The challenges to careers services are greater than ever before. Attending to students' employability within a more student-driven higher education system is high on the policy agenda. Careers services have a key contribution to make to this agenda.

This Briefing summarises a NICEC project on strategic directions for careers services in higher education, in the light of the changes taking place both in higher education and in the world of work. The project was carried out for the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. The Briefing examines:

- The evolution of careers services, and the changing context to their work.
- The institutional role of careers services.
- The national policy context.
- Adapting the traditional core activities.
- Broader strategic options.
- Professional issues and the impact of IT.
- A process for strategic planning.

AGCAS

The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services is the professional association for careers services in higher education in the United Kingdom and Eire.

NICEC

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling is a network organisation initiated and sponsored by CRAC. It conducts applied research and development work related to guidance in educational institutions and in work and community settings. Its aim is to develop theory, inform policy and enhance practice.

CRAC

The Careers Research and Advisory Centre is a registered educational charity and independent development agency founded in 1964. Its education and training programmes, publications and sponsored projects provide links between the worlds of education and employment.

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# EVOLUTION

Higher education careers services are more strongly developed in the UK than in other European countries. This is linked to the UK's non-vocational tradition, with occupational flexibility on graduation; and also to its *in loco parentis* tradition. The UK model is widely regarded overseas as a world leader in this field, alongside the USA. Graduates are less likely to be unemployed in these two countries than in any other OECD country.

The first appointments board was founded in Oxford in 1892; by the mid-1950s all universities had such a service. In the late 1960s and 1970s, they were transformed, in function and in title, into careers services. This involved more attention to careers guidance, and in particular to interventions designed to help students make their own decisions in an informed and reflective way.

With the expansion of student numbers and the pressures on higher education budgets, there has been a move away from the one-to-one interview as the core activity. Instead, an open-access model has been widely adopted, in which students have access to a wide range of resources – information services, short interviews, computer-aided guidance systems, group sessions – with a long interview available for students needing more intensive personal help.

Strong collaborative structures have also been developed across services, through AGCAS and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (CSU). These have included training programmes. A Certificate and Diploma in Careers Education in Higher Education have been launched in association with AGCAS, to provide a formal training and accreditation structure.

## THE CHANGING CONTEXT

Recent years have seen a major transformation in the structures of work and of career. The traditional model of career was concerned with progression up a graded hierarchy within an organisation or profession. Such careers have been fractured by employers' responses to the impact of new technology and the globalisation of the economy. Individuals now have to take more responsibility for their own career, redefined as the individual's lifelong progression in learning and in work.

There have also been massive changes in the graduate labour market:

- Reduced recruitment into graduate training schemes in large companies.
- Erosion of the notion of specific graduate-level jobs.
- More graduates entering employment in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

These changes have been linked to a huge expansion of the higher education system. This has placed great pressure on resources. Many students are now dependent on loans. It seems likely that students will in future be expected to pay a higher proportion of the costs of higher education. This will produce a more consumer-driven system.

Meanwhile, higher education is becoming more flexibly responsive to the concept of lifelong learning. Systems of credit accumulation and transfer make it possible for students to move more easily in and out of the system, and within and between institutions. The rigid boundary with further education is looking less tenable. There is however growing institutional diversity on these and other matters. Careers services have to respond to a wide range of different institutional agendas.

# THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF CAREERS SERVICES

Are careers services an integral part of a higher education institution, or an additional service open to review in terms of their specific costs and benefits?

Employability and career success are major outcomes which government, employers and students alike expect from higher education. This should be borne in mind in reviewing suggestions for funding services from fees to employers and/or students, or for outsourcing careers services to external contractors. Experience so far suggests that such fees are viewed as marginal rather than core income; and that while some limited functions can be outsourced, those who have looked at outsourcing as a more general solution have pulled back from it.

The key argument against outsourcing is based on the benefits of embedding careers services within institutions. This acknowledges that preparing students to make a productive and personally satisfying contribution to the economy and to society is an integral part of the function of higher education. It makes it possible to link this concern with academic planning and with the curriculum.

This has implications for where such services are to be placed within the institutional structure. The careers service can be aligned:

- To other *student* services. This can work well, but it can also marginalise the service, with a barrier of several managerial layers before it can gain access to senior management. It tends to identify the careers service as a service to individual students, outside the academic process.
- To other *academic* services. This may include staff development and consultancy to teaching departments, and involvement in academic planning.
- To other *marketing* services. This can link the service to other services designed to market the institution to employers and to potential students. It can produce conflicts between the guidance and marketing roles, in determining who is the primary client.

Alternatively, the careers service can stand on its own, recognising its uniqueness in being simultaneously a student service *and* an academic service *and* a marketing service.

Whatever its institutional location, the careers service needs to have strong links to senior management if the benefits of being institution-based are to be realised. Formal representation on key academic decision-making bodies is also crucial.

This raises the issue of how far the careers service's activities might be devolved to teaching departments. The extent of such devolution is likely to vary between departments offering vocational, semi-vocational and non-vocational courses. It is growing, as departments seek to incorporate elements relating to careers education and to employability into their course provision. Continuing support from a central service is necessary, however, to achieve breadth of opportunity, economies of scale, and consistency of standards.

## THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

Higher education sits uneasily in relation to recent government policies on careers guidance. Schools and further education offer students a dual entitlement, from the statutory Careers Service and their own mandated provision; in higher education, on the other hand, it is left to institutions to decide whether to offer a careers service, what form it should take, and what level of resource it should have. If the government is concerned that students should have access to guidance as one of the means of yielding the economic benefits from its substantial investment in higher education, it should be troubled by the disparity of current provision, and the low level of provision in some institutions.

Should strong moves be made towards a more integrated and consumer-driven lifelong learning system, some existing provision might be restructured into a lifelong guidance service based outside institutions to assure its independence and impartiality. This could be seen as complementing services based inside higher education institutions, splitting the current provision into the dual model familiar in schools and further education.

Alternatively, attention might be focused on policy levers to strengthen the role of careers services in higher education within the existing framework. Such levers might include:

- Funding formulae (difficult within the current funding structure).
- Benchmarks on staff:student ratios.
- A nationally applicable student entitlement.

# ADAPTING THE CORE

The traditional core role of careers services is helping students to manage the choices and transitions they need to make on exit from their course in order to proceed effectively to the next stage of their career. The core activities comprise:

- Individual and group guidance.
- Information.
- Employer liaison and placement.

Pressures on each of these are changing their nature and posing questions about their future form:

- Long individual guidance interviews are now increasingly complemented by short 'duty adviser' interviews, designed partly to respond to 'quick queries' and partly to diagnose students' guidance needs and signpost them to appropriate resources. This is viewed by some as a serious and regrettable erosion of quality; by others as a welcome move towards a more student-driven system, which is more in line with student self-reliance.
- Group guidance programmes have been growing, partly to achieve greater cost-effectiveness in the use of resources.
- Information technology is having a major impact on how information is made available.
- Employer liaison and placement activities are being reshaped by:
  - The decline of the 'milk-round' of on-campus selection interviews.
  - The growing practice by large employers of targeting a small number of institutions.
  - The growth of graduate recruitment into SMEs.

  This raises issues about the relationship between guidance and placement, and how careers services can keep up-to-date with developments across the full range of the graduate labour market.

Around the core activities, a range of supplementary activities has been developed:

- Additional services for students: pre-entry guidance; arranging course-related placements and/or placements in part-time and vacation jobs; teaching accredited career-planning courses and/or supporting teaching departments in incorporating careers education elements into their courses.
- Making the core activities available to other client-groups: former students; local unemployed graduates; research-contract staff.
- Playing a broader brokerage role: providing the higher education institution with labour-market information to assist in academic planning, and employers with a 'one-stop shop' which will point them to places in the institution where their needs can be met.

Extension of some of these activities could lead to broader strategic options. An important issue for the future is to what extent the core will hold together, and to what extent it might be split or restructured.

# BROADER STRATEGIC OPTIONS

In broad terms, there are seven strategic directions for careers services which could lead towards major restructuring. They are not mutua'ly exclusive. All represent activities in which many careers services already engage. But it may be difficult to scale them up within an integrated organsational structure. There may already be alternative roles and structures in place. Some institutions may want to carry out these functions in other ways, or not engage in some of them at all.

Four options are based on stronger embedding *within the institution*:

- The *integrated guidance* model, in which the careers service becomes an integral part of a continuous guidance process available to students pre-entry, on entry, and throughout the student's course, as well as on exit from it. The process is designed to help students to construct learning programmes which are related to their career aspirations as well as being intellectually coherent, and then to move on to the next stage of learning and/or work related to achieving those aspirations. The model is potentially strongly encouraged by modularisation, and resembles the approach that has been formally adopted in further education.
- The *integrated placement* model, in which the careers service's concern for placement on graduation becomes part of an integrated placement operation which also includes course-related placements, and placements into part-time and vacation jobs.
- The *curriculum* model, in which the careers service becomes part of a delivery vehicle for, or of a service designed to support academic departments in, incorporating employability skills and career management skills into course provision. This may involve a consultancy and/or delivery role.
- The *learning organisation* model, in which the careers service becomes part of a service designed to foster the career development of all members of the institution: contract researchers and other staff, as well as students.

These models are not incompatible with one another, but there are some tensions between them which mean that, beyond a certain level of provision, they may require some degree of structural separation.

The other three options are based on delivering careers services post-graduation:

- The *extended-support* model, under which the careers service is designed to support students not only on exit from the institution but also in the initial period of career development post-graduation. This recognises that many students now defer serious job-seeking until after graduation, that many take time to stabilise in an initial career direction, and that many need support in finding opportunities and developing their employability during this period.
- The *lifelong guidance* model, in which the careers service becomes part of a lifelong guidance service designed to support graduates from any higher education institution in their career development: possibly as part of a strategy for positioning the institution in relation to lifelong learning; or possibly as an opportunity for the careers service's skills to be marketed more widely, on an income-generating basis.
- The *alumni* model, in which the careers service becomes part of a longer-term support and networking service for the institution's own alumni, related to the institution's strategy for maintaining alumni links.

The alumni model is the only one which is strongly compatible with institution-based careers services; the other two tend to pull away from it towards partnership with other higher education institutions and other bodies.

Strongly resourced services may retain a significant involvement in activities linked to most or all of these models without changing their current shape. In other institutions, however, it seems likely that what will emerge will be a distributed structure, with a variety of different units each attending to one or more of the models. Within such a structure, the careers service might continue to be built around the traditional core, with appropriate links with the other units; or it might significantly change its shape and nature; or it might become the co-ordinating focus for a range of distributed services.

# PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

*Structures of professional collaboration.* Through the activities of AGCAS and CSU, a rich range of common resources has been developed in a very cost-effective way. The structures of collaboration within AGCAS have however been coming under some strain, due to the pressure on resources, the more competitive culture within higher education, and the growing diversity of institutions' needs. This raises questions about whether there should be a tighter specification of what member institutions are expected to contribute, and whether AGCAS should adopt a more flexible and diverse structure.

*Recruitment and professional development.* The last couple of decades have seen a considerable growth of professionalisation within careers services. Nonetheless, the extent to which staff hold formal professional qualifications is still very varied, and there are important issues about the extent to which guidance qualifications should be the core for all professional staff or whether a range of different professional backgrounds should be encouraged. Other issues include the adequacy of managerial expertise within careers services, and the need to provide more routes for career progression in and out of careers services, so producing greater rotation of staff.

*Quality assurance.* Some services have taken the initiative in responding to the increased pressures towards accountability. Arguably, however, institutions need support from organisations like AGCAS to provide benchmarks against which they can review their careers services' performance. The quality standards being developed by the National Advisory Council for Careers and Educational Guidance may be helpful in this respect.

## THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

IT could make it possible to deliver the main aspects of a careers service's work through a 'virtual careers centre' available where users are, rather than requiring them to come to a specific location. The direct human contact provided in a physical centre seems likely, however, to have an important role to play for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the potential of IT to improve the quality and accessibility of careers services is considerable, and not yet fully harnessed. It should be viewed not just as a tool or alternative, but as an agent of change.

# CHECK-LIST OF STRATEGIC ISSUES

## THE CHANGING CONTEXT

- What are the implications of the changing concept of career for the ways in which careers services operate?
- What are the implications of the changes in the graduate labour market, and in particular the growing importance of SMEs?
- How are careers services to respond to the greater diversity of the student population in higher education?
- What are the implications of the moves towards a more flexible higher education system, integrated more strongly into wider structures for lifelong learning?

## THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

- To what extent is providing career support to students regarded as part of the 'core offer' of the institution, or as an optional additional service?
- If it is an optional additional service, to what extent can employers and/or students be expected to pay for it, and what are the implications of exerting such charges?
- Would there be any advantages in 'outsourcing' parts or all of the service to an external supplier? What would be the disadvantages?
- If it is regarded as part of the 'core offer' and an embedded part of the institution, where is the service best located within the organisational structure to yield the potential benefits of such embedding?
- What links are needed between the careers service and senior management to realise the potential benefits of the service being institution-based?
- To what extent can the functions of careers services be devolved to teaching departments, and what forms of continuing expert support from careers services are needed by teaching departments to ensure quality of delivery?

## THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

- Is current provision for careers guidance in higher education sufficient to yield the economic benefits from its investment in higher education?
- If not, what would adequate provision comprise, and how might it be secured?
- Should there be a lifelong careers guidance service based outside higher education institutions?
- What should be the relationship between such a service and careers services based inside higher education institutions?
- Should policy levers be used to secure a minimum standard of careers guidance provision within institutions?
- If so, which policy levers should be adopted?
- What comparative data need to be collected across institutions to monitor the effectiveness of such levers?

## ADAPTING THE CORE

- What is the balance to be between (i) individual and group guidance, (ii) information, and (iii) employer liaison and placement?
- Are current employer liaison and placement activities, supported by the first-destinations data, sufficient sources of labour market information, and if not, how are these sources to be boosted and/or supplemented?
- Should the core activities continue to be integrated in a single service, or be given a greater degree of organisational separation?

## BROADER STRATEGIC OPTIONS: WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

- What is the scope within institutions for providing integrated guidance support to students prior to, during and on exit from their courses?
- What is the scope within institutions for integrating placement work on exit with course-related placements and placements into part-time and vacation jobs?
- What is the scope within institutions for incorporating career management skills into the curriculum, either separately or linked to wider concerns for employability and personal transferable skills?
- What is the scope within institutions for fostering the career development of staff as well as students?
- How far should the careers service aim to be the delivery vehicle for these various functions, and how far should it seek to work with separate structures developed to deliver them?
- What are the implications of these functions for the role and position of careers services within institutions?
- What are the benefits, disadvantages and resource implications of these different models?
- In the context of limited resources, which strategic options meet the needs of students and the institution, and provide high-quality, cost-effective solutions?

## BROADER STRATEGIC OPTIONS: POST-GRADUATION

- What is the scope for extending services to cover recent graduates both of the host institution and of other institutions?
- What is the scope for careers services to play a role in making guidance available in the local community on a lifelong basis?
- What is the scope for building lifelong careers services for alumni?
- Which of these activities should the careers service engage in?
- How are the activities to be resourced?
- Should the careers service aim to deliver such activities alone or in partnership with others?
- Which partners should it seek and what are the implications of such partnerships?

## PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

- How can the structure of AGCAS be adapted to sustain and extend the strong structures of professional collaboration that have been developed across careers services?
- How can more effective structures of professional and career development be developed for staff, to build a wider range of expertise, and enable more flexible movement in and out of careers services?
- How can clearer quality standards and benchmarking procedures be developed to assure the quality of careers services?

## THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

- How can the potential of information technology be fully harnessed?
- How can IT be used not just as a tool or alternative, but as an agent of change?

# STRATEGIC PLANNING

If careers services are to take advantage of the opportunities open to them, and if institutions are to be able to structure careers services effectively in relation to their own strategic directions, a regular process of strategic planning is needed. The process will benefit from the active involvement of key stakeholders (students, academic staff, and employers). The form of the process might be:

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

- What are the careers service's main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT analysis)?
- What are the careers service's current core activities?
- What are its current supplementary activities?
- Who are its major partners/competitors inside and outside the institution?

## WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE IN (SAY) FIVE YEARS' TIME?

- What vision do we have of the careers service's future mission and purpose, and of its relationship to the future mission and purpose of the institution?
- What are the implications of likely changes in higher education and in the world of work?
- What are the implications of the likely national policy context regarding careers guidance provision?
- Which strategic directions do we want to pursue over the next five years?
- What order of priority do we want to establish between these strategic directions?
- What are the risks of moving in these directions, and how can these risks be minimised?
- What structural form might the careers service take in five years' time?
- How do professional structures and methods need to be modified and developed?
- How do we harness IT as an agent of change?

## HOW DO WE GET THERE?

- What SMART objectives do we want to set ourselves for the short, medium and long term (i.e. objectives which are Specific, with Measureable outcomes that are Attainable and Relevant, incorporating a clear Time-scale)?
- Who do we need to influence, and how do we link our priorities to theirs?

## HOW WILL WE REVIEW AND MEASURE WHETHER WE HAVE GOT THERE?

- What outcomes will measure success?
- What stepping-stones will indicate that we are moving in the right direction?
- What process of continuing reflection do we need in order to review our goals and the extent to which we are achieving them?

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The report summarised in this Briefing is published as:

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